



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Alexandria and Cider

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As fall envelops us, the fruit most seen at grocery stores and farmer's markets is probably the apple. Used today for pies, salads and snacks, apples came to Virginia principally to be made into cider. In fact there were only two crabapple varieties native to North America before English colonists began to bring apple seedlings with them across the ocean. Unlike coffee, tea and wine grapes, apples from England grew easily in Virginia's climate and while most of the early varieties were too sour for eating, they were fermented and squeezed into cider.

Alexandrians from previous centuries consumed cider regularly, as evidenced by advertisements in newspapers. For example, on Dec. 5, 1863, during the middle of Civil War, R.H. Gemeny took out an ad in the Alexandria Gazette, saying that he had just received 20 barrels of pure apple cider. Others, such as George H. Robinson, advertised a crab apple cider that probably combined methods and materials from the New and Old Worlds.

An 1858 Gazette article included a how-to guide for fermenting one's own cider. The article claimed:

"The apples should be well ripened but not in the least decayed. Every apple with the least speck of rot in it should be removed. ... The grinding process should be performed two days before pressing, and the pomace be permitted to stand and mellow in the vat, until it assumes a deep red color."

The article portrayed high-quality cider as suitable in case of sickness, perpetuating the urban legend of alcohol as a cure-all tonic.

A contributor in 1869 claimed that: "Any good apple will make cider, but more generally, an apple full of juice, and not the best to Eat will make the best. The Virginia crab perhaps excels all other apples for cider making."

An Oct. 10, 1870 article compared cider with champagne, saying, "the champagne usually sold in this country is so inferior to good bottled cider, unadulterated and used in its right name that we wonder people do not use it in preference."

Part of cider's problem, according to the newspaper, was a perception about class: "Cider is such a vulgar drink, you know, and only costs five dollars for a case of the finest. Champagne is immensely high-toned and retails for ten times that."

What caused cider's decline? According to Virginia Cider Week, the Industrial Revolution and changing tastes influenced by a growing immigrant population that preferred beer to cider. Prohibition dealt a fatal blow to many orchards and cideries in the 20th century.

The Office of Historic Alexandria is holding its 5th annual Alexandria Cider Festival on Nov. 23 from 1 to 5 p.m. As an official Virginia Week event, the Alexandria Cider Festival has grown from 50 to more than 350 attendees. Guests receive a commemorative glass, get to hear live music and sample ciders from the now 10 participating cideries. Tickets can be purchased online at alexandriava.gov/shop for \$45 or at the door for \$55 per person.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.